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THE ARTS FORUM
AT
THE EQUITABLE

David A. Ross

Director
The Whitney Museum
of American Art

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"A Whitney Museum for the 21st Century"

Introduction
Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell

Commissioner of Cultural Affairs
City of New York

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David A. Ross returned to his New York birthplace this year to become Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art. At the age of 41, he has been a curator and museum director for two decades, primarily in California and Boston.

As a curator at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, Mr. Ross established the first department devoted to video, an artistic medium he has long advocated. In 20 years at the Everson, the Long Beach Museum, the University Art Museum at Berkeley, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, he has curated 31 exhibitions, covering both European and American art in all media.

Mr. Ross has taught and lectured about contemporary art extensively and has published a number of articles on video, performance art, photography, and other art forms. He co-directed *The Bi-National,* a large-scale exhibition in Boston and Düsseldorf devoted to German and American art of the 1980s. He is currently chairman of the Federal Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions.

The Whitney Museum was founded in 1930 and moved in 1966 to its current building, designed by Marcel Breuer. Half a million people annually visit the main museum and its branches in Stamford, Connecticut, and at the Federal Reserve Plaza, Philip Morris, and the Equitable Center.

Introduction

Mary Schmidt Campbell
Commissioner of Cultural Affairs
City of New York

I was really excited when Randy asked me to introduce David Ross, because I've known of David throughout his entire career. David began his career about 20 years ago at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, and I was living in Syracuse then. I was attending graduate school and though I didn't know him personally, I certainly knew him by reputation.

David was the first person to convince the museums of this country that video art was not an oxymoron and he did that by starting the first department of video art in an American museum, at the Everson. He was a curator there from 1971 to 1974 and it was there that his reputation took root.

Eventually, David headed west to Long Beach, California, where he became Deputy Director and Chief Curator of the Long Beach Museum; later he went to the University Art Museum at Berkeley, where he was Assistant Director for Collections and Programs, from 1977 to 1982.

He came back East in 1982 to assume the leadership of the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston and stayed there for nine years. We used to attend the Association of Art Museum Directors, a venerable association of the directors of all the "traditional" muse-

ums, and David and I were the non-traditional periphery of that organization. I found out at those meetings that here was a kindred soul, someone who was willing to talk about challenging tradition and challenging expectations.

Looking back at the exhibitions that David was involved in while he was at Boston, you can really see how he did challenge those traditions. His intellect had pushed him beyond traditional boundaries, with exhibits like "Art and Dance: Images From the Modern Dialogue," "End Game: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture," and, more recently, "Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism."

When David was appointed Director of the Whitney Museum, I think everybody here in New York breathed a collective sigh of relief. We knew that he was the right choice. And as we sat around and tried to figure out what was it about David that made him right,.some of us said, "Well, he has an insatiable curiosity. He's willing to look where other people won't look." Someone else said, "He's hard-edged and he's going to need that for New York City." Believe me, David, they're right. You do. And someone else said, "He's not content to be fashionable or trendy; that goes against his grain." They're right about that, but I think, most of all, it's because David is visionary, and he will take the Whitney into the 21st century. So welcome to New York, David. We're real glad to have you.

A Whitney Museum for the 21st Century

David Ross

Thank you, Mary.

When I was thinking about a title for this talk, the notion of talking about the Whitney Museum in the 21st century came to mind and I unadvisedly called up Randy and said, "You know, my title will be 'The Whitney Museum in the 21st Century'." I then had second thoughts about that, because, as my friends know, I'm horrible about predicting things, and I'm really not that interested in predictions of that sort; in fact, ever since the 1964 World's Fair, the notion of the 21st century has actually scared the hell out of me, and so the idea of thinking about the Whitney Museum in the 21st century, which I still conjure up with visions of the Jetsons zooming by on the 42nd floor of the Equitable Building and the like, just made me a little uncomfortable. But on further reflection, I realized that, with a little luck, I'm actually going to be the person who's going to take the Whitney Museum into the 21st century.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, in its decision some years ago no longer to collect and, in fact, to de-accession its 19th century collections, declared its own recognition of itself as a museum of 20th century art, with a particular focus on American art. As an institution, the Whitney's history nicely parallels the growth of modernism in America over

the century, traversing the mainstream now and then, sometimes opposing it, but, basically, stating the case for an American art of this century which would be respected for its own qualities.

This museum, the Whitney, has fought the good fight for nearly 60 years in its present form and nearly 20 years before that, before it became institutionalized as the "museum of American art." And, yet, now, as we approach the end of the century, we, like all museums dealing with the art of this century, must pause to reexamine the founding premises and the operating ideals that underlie museums of the 20th century. If we don't, we will run smack into a crisis that may bring us all to our knees.

There are some general issues that all museums—in fact, most cultural institutions—face together at this point in the late 20th century. We must deal with the complexities of these issues and the inherent contradictions they raise. For instance, on one hand, there's an extraordinary increase in demand for services from museums by a much broader public than most museum trustees and staff had ever imagined. And, quite tragically, at the same time, there's a rather precipitous decrease in resources. As public consciousness on the part of museum professionals has risen, so has our inability to make good on the dream.

When the Whitney was founded 60 years ago, there was a small handful of museums. We all know that the rationale for the Whitney's founding in the first place was that the Metropolitan wouldn't

take American art seriously, wouldn't accept the proffered gift of Mrs. Whitney of her collection and three million 1929 dollars to endow a wing for American art. That was a very serious issue back then. American art wasn't respected for its own merits and it was seen primarily in relationship to its European heritage. In the 60 years since the Whitney's founding, we have seen an extraordinary increase in the sophistication of our audience as well as its size.

This sophistication is matched in the critical community, the funding community and many of the other members of the museums' larger, extended family. We see that sophistication as something we can grow with, but we lack the means to do so. We all recognize in Mary Campbell's plight and the plight that we all see confronting this city an alarming decrease in government's ability and willingness to fund and support culture without politicizing it.

This is a very disturbing trend, but it's not a trend that occurs out of context. This resulting politicization of art's support structure in fact closely follows the reemergence of art as a symbolic battlefield upon which many other issues that have nothing to do with culture or art are fought out. It used to be, ironically, that art was a very exclusive club. Many people fought to get into that club; many people fought to have that club dismantled. But now, art has become a different kind of club entirely and it's being used to fight battles that have little to do with the health of the arts and all to do with

holding the arts hostage for other political goals.

As a result of the reemergence of art as a symbolic battlefield, we've once again seen that in museums and in the larger cultural world, the issue of personal and creative freedom has been raised to a new height, and demagoguery of a sort that we have not seen since the 1950s has reappeared. I believe that all of these political issues are a result of museums and other institutions refusing to recognize and respond to the change in the nature of our audience.

The decrease in the availability of public funds has also led to seemingly unavoidable conflicts, not only between competing arts organizations, but also between all of us who compete for a share of the tax dollar, creating a very unhealthy competition between those who need public support for social services and those of us who believe that the arts are a critical part of maintaining a healthy culture and a healthy society. We've also seen, as a result of this overpoliticizing, the need once again to clarify the relationship between museums and the corporate patron, as the corporate board rooms have also become an extension of the battlefield, and even those enlightened corporations who see it not only in their own interest, but as part of their corporate citizenship to support the arts are having to fight stockholders and conservative elements within their own institutions to maintain their commitment to culture.

So, with that in mind, I think about

what the Whitney of the 21st century might be like. One of the things that's very clear is that the Whitney Museum of American Art will remain a museum of American art. As contradictory as that may sound, I think we're all very committed at this point to recognizing that one of our primary jobs is to redefine the qualities that define American art.

Whose American art are we talking about? The American art that most of us learned in art history is an art that reflects the essential Eurocentric qualities of this century's great achievements. It's an art history that mirrors the notion of the westward expansion of the European civilization across the continent. It's an American art history that has, as of yet, refused to recognize that American art is, in fact, a curious vector of culture moving from west to east; from Asia, east to west; and from South America, south to north; and that this combination, which has produced the complexity that, in fact, makes American art as wondrous and interesting as it is, is one that the Whitney Museum must deal with if it is to retain its claim as this nation's preeminent "museum of American art."

The Whitney Museum in the 21st century will have to deal with the notion that American culture is essentially hybrid—that there is no such thing as a pure American culture. It's an idea that cannot exist. America's cultural richness is its diversity, and whether or not that sounds "politically correct"—and I know politically correct speech is now no longer correct—it's still our responsibility and our opportunity.

In other words, the Whitney Museum of the 21st century will define itself not by radical changes in its program. We will still be a museum of American art. We will still collect only American art, although, in fact, we will now exhibit art made by artists who are not American citizens if the exhibition of that work will help illuminate American culture and American life.

So, then, where will the innovation take place? I'm sure you're all expecting me to talk about the architectural innovation that will take place as we expand our building—and we *will* expand our building, and it will be spectacular—but the real innovation, and the innovation that I think will make all of us proud of, will be our new role as an educator, for it is to that role that the Whitney Museum must look to most strongly if it's going to stand as a model for what a museum of the 21st century must be.

The Whitney Museum of the 21st century must find ways to encourage visitors to think for themselves, to allow visitors to delight in the simple as well as complex pleasures of looking at works of art that deal with their lives as well as the lives of others who are not like them. For the Whitney Museum of the 21st century to succeed, we must continue to find ways to follow in the footsteps of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and support and value the artist.

In many ways, the Whitney Museum was America's original artists' space, its original alternative museum and, yet, the institutionalization process for the

Whitney has given it the veneer and, in fact, the quality and character of a great and stolid museum. We have to reach back into our history and reclaim some of our funkiness, and feel comfortable in taking the risks which institutions that engage artists on a day-to-day basis must continue to take.

We must learn to collect works which represent the broadest range of our most accomplished and promising artists, but more important than the actual act of collecting—which I believe is one of the highest achievements of any culture—is how we *use* those collections.

So, finally, I would say that the Whitney Museum of the 21st century will look, well, maybe like something out of "The Jetsons." I don't know. I hope not, but as vague as the physical image of the Whitney Museum of the 21st century is in my mind, as sure as I am of the fact that it has to be flexible enough to engage art made by artists who are not yet born, I am also positive that the Whitney has to be a museum that's willing to take risks, put itself on the line as an institution, and function as a friend and educator at the same time. Thank you very much.

Discussion

PAUL GUNTHER, New York Director, American Center in Paris: Do you anticipate retaining the Whitney branches or expanding them in some way?

David Ross: I believe that the branch museums of the Whitney Museum, along with the museum's Independent Study Program, which functions in relationship to our downtown branch, are a really important component of the museum. They involve a very complex interaction between a number of corporations and the museum. They would never have existed if it weren't for the generosity of these corporations. As some of you know, not only do we not spend money on the branches, but, in fact, the branches help support the efforts of the main museum on 75th Street. And so our intentions are very much to develop our relationships with our corporate partners and to maintain those spaces where we can do other kinds of shows than we're able to do in the main museum.

I like to think of the Whitney Museum as providing an opportunity for young curators to get a chance to learn the craft and to practice in a hardball stadium, and working in the branch museums of the Whitney is like being part of a great hardball league from which a number of very important curators around the country have received their training. As our relationship with the branches continues, I hope to see it remain that kind of a forum, where we can take even greater

risks, sometimes use spaces for radical reinterpretations of the collection and sometimes produce exhibitions that are little gems of delight as a result of an opportunity that may present itself without the kind of scheduling lead-time required at our main building. So, they serve a lot of functions for us at this point, especially given our limited space on 75th Street.

TED TRUSSELL PORTER: Could you give an example of an artist of another nationality whose work illuminates American life or culture?

David Ross: Sure. As we know, in the 1930s, when the decision not to show American art at the Whitney—informally, I might add; there's nothing in our charter that says anything one way or the other about American or non-American art—the conditions were very different, and I think we were working out of a defensive posture, but an understandable one. American artists were working in isolation and it made sense to recognize and try to understand that work in the condition that it was being made. But in the 1990s—even as early as the 1960s—American art was no longer being made in isolation. It was part of an international dialogue between artists using a variety of sources to communicate, whether it was the art magazines or traveling exhibitions from a variety of museums that made it a point to get art into an international dialogue.

And so, it would seem to me that an exhibition, for instance, of Fluxus material, which was a movement, as some of

you know, that began in the late '50s in Germany and in the United States, would be very hard to mount subtracting only the American art out of it, that is to say, looking at what was happening in New York and California and ignoring what was happening in Cologne and Düsseldorf. And so that's one idea. Again, Pop art was not just an American phenomenon, although I think the Americans may have made the most significant achievement. To look at the work of an artist like Richard Hamilton in relationship to the American Pop artists is quite important.

To look at the influence of American art on the development of art in other parts of the world, not just the European community, is equally important. To understand the ways in which, for instance, John Cage and the whole Black Mountain group were influenced by Asian thought, by Japanese art, by notions of Zen Buddhism, would make for a very interesting exhibition and, yet, that would previously have seemed inconsistent with the museum's standards.

PAUL GOTTLIEB, President, Harry N. Abrams: Do you see yourself concentrating on the 20th century?

David Ross: Well, the museum decided early on to be a museum of 20th century art. That was, in effect, a decision to be a museum of the art of its time. When we reach the year 2001 and we are actually in the 21st century, we'll then be a museum of 21st century art and 20th century art and we will carry all of that baggage with us. Personally, I regret the decision to jet-

tison the 19th century.

CHARLES SHORTER: Do you see the museum as an entity apart from other art institutions, or do you feel that it should be more involved in joint projects and such?

David Ross: I think I'm known as a collaborative type and I hope that, in New York, which doesn't necessarily have a reputation for supporting collaborations, I'll be able to find some support for my natural desire to work that way. We are working on one collaboration right now with the Studio Museum in Harlem and I hope that will lead to others. I had a very interesting conversation with Vishakha Desai the other day, and she and I discussed ways in which the Asia Society and the Whitney might work together to illuminate the work of Asian-American artists and the influence of American art on what's being made in Asia today. I don't know where that will go, but these kinds of dialogues are very interesting and sometimes productive.

ALLEN WARDWELL: Where does the current plan for expansion at the Whitney stand?

David Ross: The expansion plan—Michael Graves' design—is on hold and we are now restudying the initial program for the building, which was written in the early '80s—actually, it started in the late '70s—and when I finish a review of that with the staff and the board, we will reactivate the plan, conceivably going in the same direction with the same architect, or conceivably recasting the entire situation. That's a completely open ques-

tion at this point.

MILTON RHODES, President, American Council for the Arts: Is the effort to move the Whitney in the direction of being an educator influenced by the President's and the National Governors' Conference goals on education? And, secondly, in the debate between lifelong learning and K through 12 instruction, where does the Whitney stand?

David Ross: Are you referring to the President of the Whitney board or to President Bush?

Seriously, it's very clear to all of us who work in museums that so much of the crisis that we find ourselves in could have been averted if we had a more thoroughly educated audience, if we had done our job better—in other words, if we had been preparing our audiences to help defend us. In a weird way, we as a cultural community find ourselves in the position that we were in when Nancy Hanks first stated the case for the need for federal support for the arts. Somehow, we now find ourselves needing to restate that case again to a whole new generation that has not been persuaded of the entire reason why state and federal support is so vital to a healthy culture. I think we have to face up to the fact that it's our failure as cultural educators to bring a generation along with us, with our dreams and ideals, that really lies at the root of much of the political malaise that besets the cultural community today.

As far as lifelong learning is concerned, that's what we're about. The experience

of an art museum always involves learning, if you define learning as the fairly broad range of experiences that run from challenge and outrage to delight.

CHRISTOPHER HUNT: Would you like to expand on your relative interest between the two facets of an institution like the Whitney: on the one hand, a collector, with its inherent conservative tendencies and, on the other, a presenter of new work?

David Ross: Well, I wouldn't call the Whitney collection conservative, but I would say that it reflects a fairly narrow vision of what the American population is and has been. In terms of the actual works of art within it, it has some valuable *avant garde* work and, in fact, could be characterized as a rather progressive collection.

The idea of the Whitney collection, which followed from Gertrude Whitney's and Juliana Force's engagement with the artist community, was to be broad rather than deep. They really wanted to collect one of everybody's work, to help encourage every artist that they knew working in New York and in the art world of their day that they could and, as a result, there are very few concentrations of depth in the museum collection. Obviously, the Hopper collection is one that is well-known, and there are others. But that has allowed the museum's collection to develop a rather strange, iconic character, rather than one that has quirky depths and areas that can be used to explore aspects of culture outside the mainstream.

It's our responsibility to collect widely

and in depth and try to represent the broader range of people and ideas that actually constituted American art of every period in the 20th century.

ROBERT LEVINSON, Chairman, Harlem School of the Arts; Chairman, National Dance Institute: What little art there is in the public schools is about to disappear, as you probably know. Are there any plans by the Whitney alone or in collaboration with other institutions to substitute for that lack?

David Ross: We haven't worked in a specifically collaborative way in that regard, but we do serve many schools. In regard to the crisis, the tragedy that's about to beset this city, we can only do what our resources will allow us to do well. Our program is rather intensive, not a one-visit-per-student program, but one which involves preliminary work in the schools and back to the schools again after the museum visit. It's hard to extend that much further and we are constantly searching for foundation and corporate resources. I haven't had any discussions with our friends at MoMA or at the Met about educational collaboration, but it's an interesting idea and I'd be open to it.

ALEXANDRA MUNROE: I'm interested more specifically in how you define American and non-American art or, rather, American and non-American artists, especially the case of foreign-born artists. As I understand it, up until now, you've had a policy that's been based on nationality, on having an American passport. But there are several artists who have lived in the States for a long time

but who have chosen not to take on American nationality and are, therefore, not eligible for the Biennial or a one-person show.

David Ross: It's an interesting question. I'm not going to let the INS make those decisions for us. I don't think we should rely on that kind of formal governmental distinction between American citizens and others. Consider Malcolm Morley, a British citizen who's made all of his mature art since 1957 as a New Yorker. Is he an American artist? Well, if you ask Malcolm Morley, he's not; he considers himself a British artist. Would we show him (if he were willing) at the Whitney? You bet. Why? Because the work not only is made in America, but is all about his experience and attempt to deal with and reflect on American culture.

CARMEN NELSON, Vice Chair, El Museo del Barrio: How would you take Puerto Rican artists who are American citizens, but really reflect Latin culture so distinctly?

David Ross: Well, so does a lot of American art. I would be very proud to show the work of a Puerto Rican artist, and we have many times already in the museum. I think art that comes from Latin sources, from Hispanic sources, is of critical value in understanding what American culture and art are about.

SUSAN ROTHSCHILD, Counsel, Department of Cultural Affairs: Do you have any training programs to interest kids in museum careers who might not otherwise have thought about it?

David Ross: No, we don't, but I think

that's a very interesting idea and I'd be delighted to pursue it. We do have the Independent Study Program, which for 23 years has been a very intensive, one-year seminar for artists and those entering the museum program to engage in critical theory and history.

Susan Rothschild: If you're interested in extending what is considered American art, then perhaps your curators should eventually reflect that extended base.

David Ross: I think you're right, and I think, in many conversations we've had about our attempts to hire curators of color and the relatively low numbers of people of color who are looking for curatorial jobs, it gets back to the fact that, starting in high school, it's not a career track that's been promoted by guidance counselors or by the profession.

JANE GULLONG, Director, Arts International: How much time are you going to have to spend on fundraising, or do you consider that the job of the trustees?

David Ross: Probably a lot. I do consider it a job of my Board of Trustees, but it's one that I share with them. When you take the responsibility for the direction of an institution and you want the authority to move it in certain directions, hand-in-hand with that authority and responsibility goes that very sorry fact that you're the person responsible for the bottom line.

Thank you very much for coming to listen to me, and I hope to have a chance to chat with all of you individually.

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